

**THE FOUNDATIONS OF VICTORY:  
THE PACIFIC WAR  
1943-1944**

**THE NAKAI CONTINGENCY UNIT AND THE  
BATTLES OF KANKIREI RANGE  
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Lieutenant-General Adachi Hatazo, the commander of the 18th Army, who conducted the Eastern New Guinea campaign, has said of the battles fought in New Guinea that 'the difficulties by far exceeded what could be expected of any human being'. The 18th Army was forced into unimaginably difficult tactical situations, without solid strategic foundations. They had to face enemies like difficult nature, terrain, weather, disease and above all the US-Australian Allied Forces. They had to fight unexpected engagements.

Take the example of three divisions under the 18th Army. The survival rate of the 20th Division was 3.1%, the 41st Division 2.8%, the 51st Division 17.2%.

These statistics of the front line units indicate that the survival rate of the 78th Regiment of the 20th Division was only 2%, the 79th Regiment 1.5%, the 80th Regiment 1.7%, and the 26th Field Artillery Regiment 4.3%.<sup>1</sup> These figures clearly show the reality of the war in New Guinea.

However, even under these severe conditions into which the troops were thrown, they had to fight the best they could according to the tactical situations. General Adachi had expected all of his troops to adopt any possible tactical means and be flexible to the changing situations.

The first crisis that the 18th Army had to face was caused by the surprise attacks made by the two Australian divisions from the east and west sides of Lae. From this time on, the Japanese troops who had been taking the initiative, became tactically rather passive. On 4 September 1943, the Australian 9th Division landed in the east of Lae. The following day the Australian 7th Division landed at Nadzab. Due to these moves made by the Australian divisions, the lines of communication of Japanese 51st Division located in the Saramaua, 50 km south of the Australian positions, were completely cut off. Because of this tactical situation, the 51st Division started to withdraw toward Kiari, crossing over the Saruwaget Mountain Range, and passing between the two enemy divisions.

At that time, the Nakai Contingency Unit (Nakai Force) was organised under the command of Major-General Nakai Masutaro, and reconstituted by the main force of the 78th Regiment of the 20th Division. Its missions were to support the withdrawal of the 51st Division by checking the Australian 7th Division, and at the same time, holding positions within the Kankirei Range in order to stop the advance of the Allied forces that had landed at Finschhafen and Gunbi Cape while the withdrawal of the 20th and 51st Divisions was underway.

Indeed, by preventing the allied advance, the Nakai Force, indeed, saved the 18th Army from a most critical situation and gave it time to complete the withdrawal of all troops to Madang by March 1944. During these operations, the role of one battalion that was located in the Kankirei Range and which defended the route was extremely distinguished. In particular, the work of one artillery company under the leadership of Captain Ohata Masahiko must be recognised. His company fired 4260 rounds by using only two mountain guns in action against an Australian artillery regiment and allied air attacks. This chapter studies one of the tactical applications of the Imperial Japanese Army during the war in New Guinea, and focuses on the records of the battles<sup>2</sup> of Captain Ohata's artillery company.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Significance of the War in New Guinea and Road Construction**

### *The significance of the war in New Guinea*

Why did operations occur in New Guinea, and why did the Japanese Army have to fight there?

The fighting in New Guinea involved battles that tried to gain control of the air and to establish airfields through the use of ground, maritime and air power. In other words, the role of the ground forces was to defend the established airfields. The flight ranges of the Army aircraft at that time were 500-600 km, which meant that the flight route from Japan hopped from Kyushu, through Okinawa, Taiwan, the Philippines, Manado, Ambon, and finally to New Guinea. In New Guinea, which stretches 2,000 km in length, the connecting points at Babo, Hollandia, Wewak, Madang, and Lae/Salamaua were regarded as very important.

For General MacArthur, who was determined to recapture the Philippines, it was absolutely necessary to gain the same air bases for the same reasons. MacArthur is reported to have told General Eichelberger, 'I want you to take Buna or not come back alive'.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of 1943, the Imperial Headquarters had already determined that the essence of the war on the New Guinea front was the meeting engagements (ie chance, short term fire fights rather than long term encounters) between the two sides centred on the competition for bases for control of the air.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of the war in New Guinea in July 1942, when the South Seas Expeditionary Unit had landed at Buna, until July 1944, the 18th Army conducted combat operations from Salamaua to Aitape, a distance of 1,000 km.

The 18th Army had to secure their established airfields in order that the Allied Forces could not use these bases for their advance. Therefore, the war in New Guinea can be described as the defence of these airfields, and their loss and recapture for the next two long years. The role of the 18th Army in these operations throughout the war in New Guinea was extremely significant.

### *The terrain of New Guinea and the practical reality of road construction*

The mobility of the Japanese troops was greatly impeded due to its limited maritime transportation. The main obstacles to ground transportation were the terrain and the jungle vegetation. Movement from north to south was hampered by the Finisterre Mountain Range, which in places was over 4,000 metres high. The northern parts of these mountains were covered by wild jungle forests, and coastal roads were rarely available. The troops had to move through coastal swamps, soaking their feet, causing trench foot or contracting parasitical worms. They were protected from the air attacks by the jungle, but their work in building a military road had exhausted their physical strength.

The southern parts of the Finisterre Mountain Range were not suitable for road because the valleys were very deep with steep grades and flash floods frequently occurred. The weather on the peaks was extremely cold, dropping even to the zero degree mark at times. Manpower was further exhausted due to inadequate food and medical supplies.

The Japanese infantry could have demonstrated their confidence to overcome weather and terrain similar to what they had faced before in East Asia and display their fighting abilities if they had had adequate. However, in case of New Guinea, the harder they tried the sooner they exhausted themselves. Under these conditions, the expectation for a road became higher when the Japanese could not maintain air control, making maritime transportation extremely dangerous and increasing the importance of the road as the lifeline for preserving fighting strength.

### *The advance of the 20th Division and the reality of their task of road construction*

I have already stated that the real nature of the meeting engagements in New Guinea was to establish airfields. In order to connect these established airfields, the construction of the connecting roads was necessary. Aware of the fact that regaining the control of the maritime transportation could no longer be expected, Imperial Headquarters regarded the overland transportation, rather than the maritime transportation, as the sure way to nurture fighting power.

The directive so stated: 'The basis of the success of the operations [in New Guinea] is dependent on the construction of the main road which can be used for transporting the troops and materials, and to prepare for the construction of the necessary airfields. Therefore, the necessary mapping and terrain information must be gathered.'<sup>6</sup>

The 18th Army was tasked to construct the road between Madang and Lae, which was to become the main logistic line transporting troops and supplies. The Eighth Area Army had responded to this task by saying the distance between Madang and Lae was 400 km, approximately the distance between Tokyo and Osaka, and it would take 40 days for two companies of infantry to move that distance in New Guinea. It also said that improving the road for automobile use would take four to five months.

In the last part of February 1943, the Commander of the 18th Army had ordered the main portion of the 20th Division at Wewak to move to Madang, and to open a road between the Finisterre Mountain Range and the sea coast. The 18th Army, even after losing air control of the area, tried to keep the important base at Lae on the coast, and began construction of the road between Madang and Lae in order to maintain the line of communication.

On April 20, the main force of the 20th Division had arrived at Madang from Wewak. The 20th Division was a regular division, home based in Korea, and was tasked to construct the airfields in Madang, then to construct the road between Madang and Lae. The construction of this road was critically important in order to secure Lae. The Division Commander, Lieutenant-General Aoki Shigemasa, himself worked along with the troops, but contracted malaria and died on July 2. Lieutenant-General Katagiri Shigeru succeeded him as commander, but the geography of New Guinea's terrain resisted the challenges of the human power. The only map the Japanese had was the 'Map of Eastern Papua' (1/25,000 scale) and the details of the map did not match the actual area.<sup>7</sup> Also, even after construction, the road became muddy during the rainy season and posed obstacles even worse than those of the jungle.

Lieutenant-Colonel Imoto Kumao, who accompanied the Eighth Area Army Commander General Imamura Hitoshi, as his staff officer, wrote in his diary of 29 May 1943:

The Imperial Headquarters had deployed the troops into New Guinea without any knowledge of how to use them in the terrain of New Guinea. The troops have tried to achieve their tasked missions. However, in the face of increased enemy strength compared with our own, the difficulties caused by the terrain multiplied. Under such circumstances road construction had become impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The war situation of the area had gradually worsened, and the work on road construction had become no longer sustainable. Then, Adachi suspended road building owing to the Australian 9th Division's landing in the east of Lae, and the landing of the Australian 7th Division in Nadzab on 4 September 1943. The main portion of the Japanese 20th Division was determined to secure the Dampier region, after completing the road between Erima and Yokopi.

### *The discontinuation of the road construction and the organisation of Nakai Force*

Lieutenant-General Adachi, 18th Army Commander, had decided to abandon the Lae/Salamaua area, and ordered the 51st Division move to Kiari, by way of crossing over the Saruwaged Mountain Range. The main portion of the 80th Regiment was dispatched to reinforce the area to defend against the expected Australian landing at Finschhafen. The Nakai Detachment was organised around the 78th Regiment, and was tasked as its basic mission to support the withdrawal of the 51st Division. Major-General Masutaro Nakai, the commander, had decided to conduct operations to check the Australian 7th Division's advance in the Markham Valley. The 3rd Battalion was dispatched to Kaiapit, and the 2nd Battalion was sent to the Kankirei Range which was the point closest to the road leading to Madang.

On September 17, after the confirmation of the retreat of the Japanese 51st Division from Lae, the Australian 7th Division Commander decided to dispatch the 6th Papua Independent Company to Kaiapit, with the 21st Brigade to follow.<sup>9</sup> On the same day, the 6th Company received orders 'to take over Kaiapit as soon as possible, and to prepare the airfield with the runway of 1,200 yards for the landing of transport aircraft. Also, to undertake reconnaissance activities and destroy the enemy found in the area.' Thus the situation had arisen where both Japanese and Australian sides had dispatched their advance units to Kaiapit. The Japanese mission was trying to construct the road to maintain their strength, while the Australians were pursuing their objectives of securing airfields.

### **The Operational Guidance given by the Commander of Nakai Force, in regard to the Operations within the Finisterre Mountain Range**

#### *Meeting engagement conducted at Kaiapit*

The Australian 7th Division had landed in Nadzab. Considering the situations and the given missions, Major-General Nakai had decided to encounter the Australians along the road between Madang and Lae, and dispatched the 3rd Battalion ahead, departing from Yokopi headed for Kaiapit. The decision was made based on the Imperial Japanese Army's Operational Manual, which stated 'the essence of the meeting engagement is taking the initiative'.<sup>10</sup>

The main part of the Nakai Contingency Unit had departed Yokopi on September 7, and arrived at the so-called 'forest of Soul' closer to Kaiapit in the evening of September 18. The advance was delayed due to the heavy rain and the troops moved with soaking feet through the muddy water. On the other hand, the advance company, which departed earlier, was facing heavier counter-attacks by the superior enemy force.

This Kaiapit operation ended unsuccessfully, because the Australians had already taken 'Church Hill', which was the objective of the operation. The chance of success had already been lost, and the main force detachment had to execute a rescue operation of the advance unit. On the 21st, a part of the Australian unit had moved along the Markham River to Zagaraga, 10 km west of Kaiapit. At this time, the Japanese had attempted a special infiltration and raiding operation conducted by the Saito Volunteer Unit.

The Saito Unit was organised into four small attack groups, each of four men. They had attempted to infiltrate into the enemy camp of 300-350 men at night while the enemy were asleep, attacking them with explosives and automatic rifles. The unit's first operation was executed on August 1, and destroyed two enemy barracks, 11 houses and three mortars.<sup>11</sup> The second attempt was against Dakisaria and Marawasa, and a third attempt was against the enemy troops within 'the Forest of Soul'. The enemy reacted to these raids with heightened alerts. Afterwards Saito's men tried another 20 attacks. Thus, the works of Nakai Unit were judged to have contributed to the successful extraction of the 51st Division.

### *The Unit shifted to the defence posture at Kankirei*

Kankirei (or 'summit of joy') was so named because, in June 1943 when the troops of the 20th Division had reached to the top of the mountain range and were looking down the Ramu River Plain, they cheered with joy because they had completed the road from Madang. However, Australian troops were already approaching this road from Madang.

On September 22, the Australian 20th Brigade landed in Finschhafen. The main part of the 20th Division tried to destroy their attempts, and to stop their landing. On September 23, the new order was issued to Nakai Force, which had been tasked to support the 20th Division's withdrawal, and 'to occupy Hill 910 of Kankirei, and to fiercely meet and check the movement of the advancing enemy'. Major-General Nakai issued the following orders:

1. The 1st Battalion of the 78th Regiment is to support consolidation of the 3rd Battalion back into the regiment (the 3rd had been deployed for combat in Kaiapit).
2. The 78th Regiment (less 1st Battalion) is to move in to the area of Kankirei.
3. The 1st Artillery Battalion is to be located at the area of Erima and tasked to defend the sea-coast.
4. The 3rd Battalion is to advance to Hill 610, and defend against the enemy moving from Kesawai to the direction of Madang.
5. The 3rd Company and the Saito Volunteer Unit is to defend against the enemy moving toward the west through the southern part of the Mountain Range, and to make reconnaissance against the advance of the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

### *The operations of the artillery units*

Lieutenant-Colonel Kageyama, the 1st Field Artillery Battalion Commander, had ordered each company to carry their ammunition themselves as previously assigned. On October 8, Major-General Nakai stopped the 3rd Artillery Company and said to the Company Commander Captain Ohata Masahiko (according to Ohata's notes): I have just ordered one Artillery Company to reinforce Kankirei to defend the position. All the other artillery units are on the move and scattered so contact is difficult. The unit at Kankirei must fight to the death. I am serious.<sup>13</sup>

Captain Ohata accepted the task of the Unit Commander on condition that the Commander himself would explain the change of order to Ohata's Battalion Commander. Then Captain Ohata readily moved to Kankirei. One Battalion from the 26th Field Artillery Regiment was to be deployed to Kankirei. However, since Major-General Nakai himself personally had ordered Captain Ohata there, the 3rd Artillery Company was now tasked to conduct the battles of Kankirei with their two artillery guns.

### *The meeting engagement at Kesawai (November 8-15)*

In the middle of October, a part of the Australian 7th Division had already moved into Kesawai, after taking over Tompu following the withdrawal of the Nakai Unit. They were preparing to go in to Madang. The airfield at Tompu could take any mid-sized aircraft so that the Japanese posts at Kankirei and the supply routes were exposed to light bomber air attacks. Therefore, the Unit Commander decided to make surprise attacks against the Australian forces at Kesawai in order to restrain the enemy at Tompu.

The plan of these attacks was first to send the infiltrating troops of the Saito Volunteer Unit with explosives into small Australian camps (30-40 tents each) in Kesawai at around 3 am, December 8. Then, send another Sakai infiltrating Unit. At the same time, the main part of the 78th Regiment opened the attacks against Futaba Aoba and Holiba Mountains. After completing these surprise attacks successfully, the main part of the Regiment would make preparations to attack the enemy in Tompu.

The battles spearheaded by Saito Volunteer Unit went successfully, and the Australian forces started withdrawing toward the east of Flejapo River. The Detachment Commander, seeing his objectives achieved, decided to end the attacks, and all the troops returned to their main camps. The Kesawai operations were a success, owing to the enthusiastic attempts of each battalion commander to pursue his given missions within the short time for the operations.

## **Defence Preparation at Kankirei**

### *Guidance given by the Nakai Force Commander during the defence preparation*

Major-General Nakai, accompanying Captain Ohata, had made his reconnaissance tour around the defensive area of Kankirei. The guidance given by the Force Commander is based on Captain Ohata's diary.

### *The prohibition of committing suicide by artillerymen*

The Detachment Commander had instructed Ohata that 'the enemy is extremely sensitive to the use of artillery fire arms so that the artillerymen are expected to cooperate closely with the infantry men until the very end'. 'And', Ohata recorded, 'I realised what was expected from our commander, and he also said please take good care of your life. It took more than twenty years to train one artillery officer, but a gun is only material. We can replace the gun, but not an artilleryman, 'Nakai must have quoted from the *Artillery Field Manual* which said (Article 10): 'The gun is the life of the Artillery. Therefore, the Artilleryman must live and die with the gun, and share the honour and shame together with the guns. One must continue to fight until the end'. Owing to the prohibition against suicide made by the Force Commander, however, many artillerymen survived the ensuing battles.

### *The selection of covering positions to enable prolonged combat by artillery guns*

The Unit Commander also instructed that, 'The Artillery position must be shifted daily after firing so as not to be caught by the enemy'. However, the gunners also had to keep supporting the infantry without delay or gaps in firing.

The first gun position had been half concealed. Therefore, the emplacement became a target of enemy fire as soon as the first shot was fired. Fortunately, however, the gun was safe even though enemy fire punctured its gun shield in 10 places.

Captain Ohata thought that if he could conceal the flash made at the time of firing by lowering the position of gun and covering the gun he could preserve it during the fighting. The second gun position was completely covered by the shelter. 'However', Ohata wrote, 'the footsteps of the soldiers who were coming in from the behind the position were spoiled by the search airplane. We were indeed astonished by their way of finding the gun position.' He continued:

As we received the 2nd squad, I located them in the ideal location in the outskirt of Byobu-yama (Shaggy Ridge). This position was protected by the ridgeline in front of them. Thus enemy shells flew over the defiladed gun and we received the impact of enemy shells which came in 300 metres safely behind our position.

### *The fortification of the gunnery position in order to improve its survivability*

Captain Ohata requested the Detachment Commander to send the engineer support to fortify the artillery position so that it could continuously support the front line infantry. The following day, one engineer platoon arrived and fortified the position. Also, the unit added more landline communications between the forward infantry and the supporting artillery positions.

### *The accumulation of munitions to sustain artillery combat*

Captain Ohata estimated that he needed to accumulate 1,500 rounds for each gun before the opening of the decisive battles, and also needed to have 20 rounds as his daily unit of fire before the all out fighting. He offered to carry the artillery ammunition from Yokopi to his fortified positions, since vehicles moved the ammunition from Erima where part of the battalion was located. From Yakopi each man carried two rounds (6kg each), and took two days to make the round trip on foot. So, 500 rounds required 100 men taking five days. It was indeed fortunate that the vehicles were used to carry the munitions at least part of the way.



## *The occupation of the combat position and the initial battle*

### *a. Area intelligence estimate*

The problem that arose here was the fact that there were no accurate maps. Without maps, how could they prepare a firing plan? Captain Ohata went along the same route as Nakai, and made an area reconnaissance. Ohata had grasped the terrain appreciation as follows: 'the key terrain is Kankirei located in the centre of defence, with Fubatsusan to the east, Byobu-yama (Shaggy Ridge) forward down the centre, and Kankirei-west-side-hill (Prothero I) to the west. Of the two main roads, one is the road coming through the edge of Byobu-yama, and other is the road coming along the Prothero Hill, which were regarded as the roads through which the enemy would come. Then, the artillery commander selected observation points of these routes, and located his gun positions so that they had accurate range and firing data.

### *b. The occupation of the combat position*

The combat positions of each Company at Kankirei were located 1km apart. The 1st Company, machine gun company, and regimental infantry gun platoon were positioned at Fubatsu-san. One construction company was positioned forward. At the central Byobu-yama point, the 11th Company (later replaced by the 6th Company) was positioned. Each company was isolated, separated by deep valleys, and protected by the barbed wire around the position. The heavy weapons were concealed, and the communication trenches between the covering positions were completed.

Byobu-yama position, which was the main defence position, was located on the steep mountain ridge. At one end of the position was a concealed, fortified pillbox. The first defence line was located 100 metres behind this pillbox, and groups of two to three foxholes for individual fighting positions were located behind. The second defence line guarded with heavy machine guns and an infantry assault gun was placed behind that. Then, the company headquarters was located in the low ground and the artillery observation point was located on the hill within the heavily guarded defence positions before reaching the third defence line.

While Ohata Company's headquarters, observation post and one mountain gun were located within Kankirei and Fubatsu-san, the Baba Platoon was deployed to occupy the combat position at Byobu-yama and mainly tasked to defend the flank in the direction of Byobu-yama and Irie Village.

### *c. The initial firing engagement against the enemy*

On October 9, the 2nd Battalion was defending Kankirei. The 1st Battalion was withdrawing toward Fubatsu-san where the 5th Company's positions were located. Captain Ohata, stationed at the unit headquarters in Kankirei, was tasked by Nakai to support the withdrawal of the 1st Battalion. Then, he unlimbered the artillery gun and brought it into firing position. The following description of the battle was taken from Captain Ohata's note:

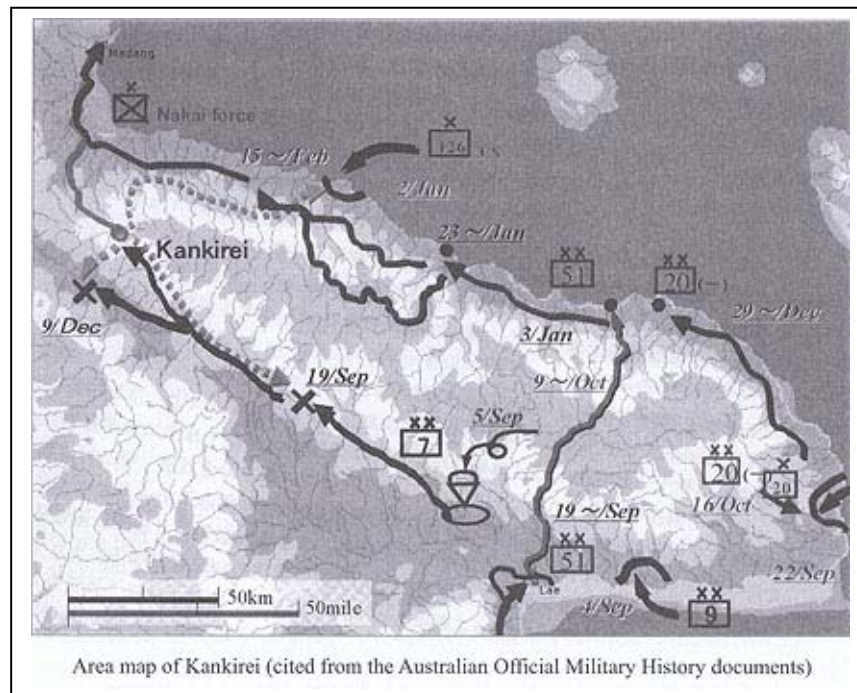
On the 11th, as we were moving toward Byobu-yama, we spotted the enemy on the ridgeline. A group of people, 50-60, were bivouacking. We saw three of their tents as they were lit by the morning sun. We fired 100 rounds on the first day, and on the second and third days we fired the same number. The Nakai Force Commander rewarded us and said, 'Our infantry unit has completed its withdrawal and the artillery support was effective.'

Thus, the withdrawal of the forward unit was accomplished, and the defensive battles had begun at Kankirei. The following descriptions of the process of the battles were taken from the notes of Captain Ohata.

## The Process of Battles at Kankirei (October 1943-1 February 1944)

### 1. First attack

Starting from around 0900 on October 18, 16 Curtis fighter planes flew over the Flejabo valley and fired at the Iriemura positions. The enemy had also crossed over the Flejabo River. The engineer company's Lieutenant Shimojo immediately fired 24 or 25 rounds at the enemy. In this battle, we destroyed five of their machine guns and two mortars. They had to withdraw from the area, conducting their retreat under cover of smoke, delivered perfectly by the supporting aircraft.



### 2. Second attack

The enemy had shifted the course of their attack after failing in their assault on Iriemura, and headed toward Fubatsu-san (Cam's Saddle). Between each of our defence positions, there was a distance of about 3 km. So, we had positioned scouts every 500 metres. They reported that about 200 enemy troops had infiltrated into our defence lines. However, they were caught by our mines. We saw the black smoke along with the sound of explosions.

The biggest threat we had to face was the enemy's artillery. They had 27 20-pound artillery guns, and their numbers incomparably exceeded ours. Their firing range was 10,700 metres (11,900 yards) while ours was only 8,300 metres (9,077 yards). However, their mortars were located within our firing range. After our successful firing, their mortars ceased their attacks against Iriemura.

### 3. Third attack (25 December-16 January)

On December 25, the enemy artillery started their attacks, coming from three different directions. All of their attacks seemed to have concentrated on our positions at Byobu-yama. They fired more than 6,000 artillery rounds between 0800 and 1000. As we received a report that the Australians had started moving toward McCaughlley's Hill, we fired at them, and they withdrew.



The enemy, however, had already destroyed our first defence line, and started advancing toward our second defence line. On order, Captain Ohata fired 500 rounds using his mountain gun. The supporting fire maintained the second defence line and saved the infantrymen holding positions there.

On January 2, Captain Yano Kakuji relieved the Battalion Commander, Major Shoji Kagawa, who was ill with malaria. Captain Yano, as the Battalion Commander, had sent one additional platoon led by 2nd Lieutenant Yamashita to the west side of Kankirei, as he observed there were many unprotected positions in the area.

#### *4. Fourth attack and the fall of Byobu-yama position (January 20-22)*

On January 16, 70 light bombers bombed Kankirei. On January 20, the enemy's gunfire had begun at 0800. They were shooting against the first defence line of Byobu-yama, re-taken by the Japanese, and against the Prothero II area where Baba Platoon was defending.

I received the order from Yano Battalion Commander directing me to 'support our counter attack force against the advancing enemy at Byobu-yama'. Also, I received a request coming from 2nd Lieutenant Urayama for support for his attempted counterattack against the enemy advancing toward Byobu-yama.

Captain Ohata continued to fire against the advancing enemy toward Byobu-yama and against the advancing enemy toward the Headquarters of 6th Company located in the south side of the mountain. At that time, Captain Ohata received a call from 2nd Lieutenant Urayama, requesting fire support. Then he said, 'Make sure to contact me when you need to adjust our target range by 12.5 metres for each time.' So, he extended the fire range as 2nd Lieutenant Urayama asked. By this time Captain Ohata had only 100 rounds left.

Byobu-yama positions were maintained as the result of the counterattacks made by the 11th and 6th Infantry companies and of the fire support provided by the Artillery Company.

#### *5. Fall of Prothero Hill and the end of Kankirei positions (January 22-23)*

Another enemy attack front was the Prothero Hill I, located in the north-western side of Byobu-yama. Here were Baba Platoon's positions. Also, Yamashita Platoon was deployed at Prothero Hill I. 'I received a call from 2nd Lieutenant Baba who reported while crying that he lost three men headed by Sergeant Nakamura whom he had sent to rescue the infantrymen in the forward defence position, as he fired his gun against the approaching enemy who were within 50 metres of his position.'

One infantry platoon located forward on the flank of Baba Platoon was completely wiped out. Then, the enemy surrounded the Baba Platoon. Captain Ohata requested Battalion Commander Yano's permission to withdraw his troops from the west side of Kankirei in case he could no longer support the infantry. However, the request was denied because that position was critical to the defence of Kankirei. Captain Ohata did not have another gun to spare in order to support Baba Platoon while he was firing against the enemy on Byobu-yama's main area. Sixteen men under 2nd Lieutenant Baba were believed already dead, and the men of the 6th Company surrounded and annihilated. Without the fighting power to hold the position, on the evening of the 21st, all the men left the area to be assembled at the last defence position at Yano-yama (Crater Hill), one km north of Kankirei.

#### *6. Battle of Yano-yama position (January 23-31)*

Since the enemy did not pursue us, we were able to assemble and complete our field fortifications defensive positions. The battalion headquarters, Machine Gun Company, 6th Company and 1st Company were positioned in a circular defence. On the 22nd, the enemy started appearing. On the third day after coming to Yano-yama, the enemy's attacks increased in intensity. By the fifth day, the enemy completely surrounded Yano-yama. Our ammunition and food were also running out.

The defence commander was resigned to total defeat, and he ordered the infantrymen without rifles to withdraw, together with the artillery units, in the direction of regimental headquarters. Two hundred and fifty men, among them 50 artillerymen, were still surrounded by the enemy. They had only one mountain gun with 120 rounds, and the gun was not in a covered position enabling it to fire in all directions. Captain Ohata had burnt unit documents including the firing chart, combat directives, and reports. Also, he called regimental headquarters and transmitted his final messages saying, 'I deeply regret that Kankirei was taken. 250 men under the direction of Captain Yano will fight till the last man.' The defence commander soon sent 60 men of Morisada Company to rescue these 250 men. A warrant officer now commanded Morisada Company since they had already lost their three Platoon leaders, and the Company Commander was wounded. They had 200 men at the start of the battle of Kaiapit, but now were reduced to only 60 men.

All the men suffered from lack of food. On January 31 they received their last meal of one scoop of cooked rice. They were told that the enemy would not break through as long as they held until the last man.

1st Lieutenant Nishimura, who had been sent to the Unit Headquarters, returned with orders from the Unit Commander. The message was that all the companies under Battalion Commander Yano were to abandon the positions that evening and reassemble at Saipa. The mountain gun was dismounted, and the parts, including the optical sights and breech, were buried. Then, the Company made it back to Saipa the same night. After being greeted by the Kageyama Battalion Commander, the troops were fed and, according to the diary of Captain Ohata, slept two entire days.

The main part of the 78th Regiment was now tasked to defend the Nanzan Peak located in the northern part of Kankirei. Major-General Nakai requested that the defences include the artillery company since their support was extremely effective. The Kageyama Battalion Commander also cautioned Nakai not to throw away the artillery since its support was also indispensable. He noted the example of Baba Platoon which was annihilated without receiving any infantry. Major-General Nakai promised the safe return of Ohata Artillery Company.

An analysis of the battles conducted during the period of three and half months, from 10 October 1943 to the end of January 1944, follows.

### *7. The significance of the Battles of Kankirei*

The mission of Nakai Force was to support the withdrawal of the 51st Division. They were defending Kankirei in order to stop the advance of the Australian 7th Division. During the period of the beginning of the year 1944, the 18th Army was in the following condition. The 51st Division was at Kiari and Gari undergoing reconstitution. The main part of the 20th Division was assembling around Sio, 10 km east of Finschhafen. The 41st Division at Wewak was still preparing to advance toward Madang.

On January 2, the Allied Forces landed at Gunbi Cape, about 100 km west of Kiari and Sio, cutting off the supply route of the 20th and 51st Divisions, and placing the main part of the 18th Army in the terrible circumstances. On January 5, 18th Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Adachi, decided to conduct a 300 km long mobile operation by withdrawing both the 20th and 51st Divisions. Under the unified command of Lieutenant-General Nakano Hidemitsu, they moved through the peaks of the Finisterre Mountain Range to Madang. The Nakai Force located at Kankirei was tasked to support these two Divisions' withdrawal operations.

On January 7, Major-General Nakai moved his force headquarters to Atsusa and tasked the main part of the 1st and 3rd Battalions to guard the area, while tasking Colonel Matumoto Matsujiro, the regimental commander, to defend Kankirei. The Nakai Force's mission was to secure the passages of withdrawing troops and to accumulate supplies while defending against the advance of the enemy.

The Nakai Force had successfully completed its mission to support the withdrawal of two divisions to Madang by the end of February. At the time of these two Divisions' departure, the troops numbered a total of 13,000 men. Of these 3,700 men were lost in the mountains, and 9,300 men reached Atsusa.<sup>14</sup> Then, 7,435 men successfully reached Madang in the period of 12 February-7 March.<sup>15</sup>

While the 41st Division was already in Madang by February, the three divisions under the 18th Army finally made their way to Madang by the end of March. The work of the Nakai Force was an extremely important one as they had successfully defended Kankirei by stopping the advance of the Australian Forces and keeping open the withdrawal of the Japanese troops. Their successful accomplishment owed much to the commander and the men of the Nakai Force applying tactics consistent with the terrain and overall situation. I would like to describe their deeds.

### **The Application of the Tactics During the Battles of Kankirei**

#### *The flexible tactical applications used by the Commander of the Force*

At the battle of Kaiapit, Major-General Nakai had enthusiastically supported the withdrawal of the 51st Division by sending the Detachment. Also, at the Kesawai Operation, he sent the Saito Volunteer Unit to infiltrate the enemy camps at Tompu airfield, thus displaying active tactical initiative while covering a withdrawal.

During the battles of Kankirei, he placed one battalion on the key approach route and prepared a fortified defence. One artillery company was sent to defend the forward defence line, since the Australians were susceptible to artillery gunfire. One artillery battalion was also deployed to Erima to defend against the enemy landing. Major-General Nakai's superior leadership should be recognised as he handled the situations well at the time of US troops' landing at Gunbi Cape, also successfully withdrawing his two divisions to Madang.

#### *The mutual executions of their missions among the leaders, requests and tasking*

Major-General Nakai made all leaders at each level, including the defence commander of Kankirei, company commanders, platoon leaders, aware of the mission of his Force. It was exemplified as the protracted defence exhibited by two platoon leaders during the battles of Kankirei. The successful counter-attacks by those units owed much to the artillery support provided by Ohata's artillery company. It was a case of Captain Ohata appropriately making his requests, and the quick response by the Force Commander to those requests.

The shortages of manpower at Prothero Hill I resulted in the annihilation of the Baba Platoon and Katayama Company. As a consequence, the fall of Kankirei became inevitable.

Battalion Commander Yano withdrew his troops from the defence line, rather than sacrificing them by fighting to the death. The priority of the mission of the Nakai Force was the ultimate accomplishment of the given mission. This awareness was evident throughout the regiments and the divisions.

#### *Closer cooperation between infantry and artillery tactics*

During the defence battles, two mountain guns had actively supported the withdrawal of the infantry from the first defence line. For the main front, the artillery continued to fire against the advance of the enemy. Also, the artillery actively defended the flank of the defensive position. The infantry also covered their positions, so that the artillery gunfire could pass overhead. Also, the infantry cooperated with the artillery as they spotted the enemy position firing machine guns and mortars. The artillery fire accurately suppressed enemy fire.

Because of communications by landline in supporting the counter-attack of the infantry against the enemy, the cooperation between infantry and Artillery during these battles was a model for the Japanese Army. The use of gunfire by Captain Ohata should be also recognised as exceptional. Even today's advanced tactics may capitalise on these valuable lessons of small unit tactics.

## Conclusion

The war in New Guinea showed the shortcomings of the Japanese Army. Take for example the air route from Tokyo to this battle ground. Each soldier, each bullet, each single grain of rice had to be brought across this great distance. The Imperial Headquarters had thought that this war was one of meeting engagements. However, we had to face a much different challenge. We had to face the Allied forces whose supply bases were closer than ours and who could therefore fight a protracted campaign.

We tried to maintain our war strength by constructing the road between Madang and Lae. However, instead we exhausted our strength. We had fallen into a pattern of reinforcing failure so that the worse things got the harder we tried.

We must take these lessons learned from the war in New Guinea seriously. The Imperial Headquarters repeated this unwise undertaking at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Contrary to how we wasted our strength in the construction of airfields, the Allied forces took only the connecting points, leapfrogging from one point to the other, by sea and air. Road construction could be done after the occupation of the vital points, not during it. Indeed we have encountered a different aspect of war.

Kankirei was where both the Australians and Japanese met, each using their best tactics. By defending Kankirei, the reconstitution of the 18th Army became possible. The troops were sure that the defence of the road could contribute to the success of withdrawal.

By studying the flexible operational guidance of the Commander of Nakai Force, we can see the best use of the tactics among the various leadership levels as applicable to the situations. The troops were held together under one tasked mission, and resisted until the last possible moment. New Guinea was not an easy battle ground. There were no places for ostentation or falsehood, but only a cold reality. Therefore, studies of the war in New Guinea, tactically or strategically, give our hearts a feeling of the terrible reality of fighting there.

## Endnotes

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3. Ohata was born in 1919 and is a graduate of the 37th Class, Tokyo Military Cadet School, and 57th Class, Japan Military Academy.
4. Boeicho, Boei kenshujo senshishitsu (ed), *Senshi sosho: Minami Taiheiyo rikugun sakusen* (2) *Gadarukanaru-Buna sakusen* (Official military history: Army operations in the South Pacific (2) Guadalcanal-Buna operations (Tokyo: Asagumo shimbunsha, 1969), 353. The original quotation appears in Robert Eichelberger, *Our Jungle Road to Tokyo* (New York: Viking Press).
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6. Ibid, 20.
7. Ibid, 106.
8. Imoto Kumao, *Sakusen nisshi de tsuzuru DaitoA senso* (Operational Diary of the Greater East Asia War) (Tokyo: Fuyo shobo, 1997 rpt), 423.
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10. Kyoiku sokanbu (Inspector General of military education) (ed), 'Sakusen yomurei,' dai 2 bu (Field Service Regulations, 2nd edition), July 1940, 42.
11. Tanaka Toshio, *Rikugun Nakano gakko no tobu nyuginia yugekisen* (The Nakano school's raids in eastern New Guinea) (Tokyo, Senshi kankokai, 1997), 42.
12. Boei senshishitsu (ed), *Minami Taiheiyo rikugun sakusen* (3) *Munda-Saramaua*, 440.
13. Ohata interview.
14. Boeicho, Boei kenshujo senshishitsu (ed), *Senshi shosho: Minami Taiheiyo rikugun sakusen* (4) *Finbshuhaaben-Tsurubu-Tarokina* (Official military history: Army operations in the South Pacific (4) Tsurubu-Tarokina) (Tokyo: Asagumo shimbunsha, 1972), 405.
15. Boeicho, Boei kenshujo senshishitsu (ed), *Senshi sosho: Minami Taiheiyo rikugun sakusen* (5) *Aitape-Puriaka-Rabaul* (Official military history: Army operations in the South Pacific (5) Aitape-Emress Augusta Bay-Rabaul) (Tokyo: Asagumo shimbunsha, 1970), 5.